

November 13, Proper 28/Fr. Theo's last sermon

Three men are hiking and they unexpectedly come upon a large raging, violent river. They need to get to the other side, but have no idea of how to do so. So the first man prays to God and says, "Please God, give me the strength to cross this river." Poof! God gives him big arms and strong legs, and he is able to swim across the river in about two hours, but only after almost drowning a couple of times. Seeing this, the second man also prays to God and says, "Please God, give me the strength ... and the tools to cross this river." Poof! God gives him a rowboat and he rows across the river in about an hour, but only after almost capsizing the boat a couple of times. The third man has watched how all this has worked out for the others, so he too prays to God and says, "Please God, give me the strength and the tools...and the intelligence... to cross this river." And poof! God turns him into a woman. She looks at the map, hikes upstream a couple of hundred yards, and walks across the bridge.

Talk about using your talents wisely! Okay, what about this one?

A man has been confined to his bed in his house for several weeks. He is sick, dying, and does not expect to last long. One morning he wakes up and finds his room filled with a wonderful aroma, a smell that takes him back to the happy days of his childhood: the smell of home-made peanut butter cookies, his favorite treats, fresh out of the oven.

Am I dead?, he thinks to himself. *Am I in Heaven? Or maybe I'm asleep and dreaming?* He decides to find out. Calling upon strength that no one realized he had anymore, he manages to pull himself out of bed, slithering onto the floor. He then decides that he is neither dead nor dreaming, and sets out to find the source of the smell for himself.

Slowly, painfully, he pulls himself along the floor of his bedroom and through the open doorway into the upstairs hall. He then manages to crawl down the steps, headfirst, slowly, carefully. Finally he is on the ground floor and begins to crawl towards the kitchen. He gets to the kitchen, pries the door open with his fingertips, and is overwhelmed by the smell of the cookies. He crawls along the floor to the table, which he knows is full of cooling cookies. Dragging himself to a table leg, full of joy that he has reached his goal, he pulls himself up partway and reaches his hand out for one of the treats from his childhood. Suddenly a spatula smacks his hand away.

"Hands off!" says his beloved wife sternly. *"Those are for the funeral!"*

Now if that's not a Red Wing joke...

I had to do it, you know.
I had to start out with something that would lift our spirits, because otherwise...
Oh my! What a set of readings to go out on.
So full of gloom and doom and judgment.
Not very happy sounding; not very full of the hope with which I would leave you.
And yet...we get these readings because something,
in this case the church year, is nearing its end;
but something is also about to begin.
Next Sunday is Christ the King, your name day and the culmination of Pentecost,
the final celebration of the Church at work in the world as followers of Jesus.
Then it will be Advent, with its message of hopeful expectation and promise,
and all hearts will turn to thoughts of renewal as the ancient story is told once again.
Looked at thematically in that way, all of this is a blessed serendipity indeed,
one where the events of real life and the present moment
seem to mimic the eternal, *kairos* time of God.
So I actually think it a perfect note
on which to celebrate the end of my ministry among you
and the beginning of Fr. Michael's.

A word or two about my ministry.
The past 14 months has been a time full of growth, of challenges,
of excitement, of anxiety...and I wouldn't have missed a minute of it.
Well...maybe one or two.
My personal prayer throughout this time has been a simple one:
that I might serve you as you deserve to be served—
encouraging you to fully claim your gifts, guiding you into “best practices,”
loving you for who you are.
In turn, you have graciously welcomed me as educator, pastor, counselor,
sacramentalist, and spiritual companion.
Together we have celebrated with couples joined together in holy union;
grieved over losses of life; and rejoiced at baptisms.
Together we have seen good friends leave and we have made new ones.
Together we have wrestled over weighty points of theology
and laughed over silly jokes, often enough on me;
we have expressed our tears and our anger and our joy;
and—let's be honest—we have occasionally butted heads,
generally, I am glad to say, playfully rather than painfully.
Through it all, according to the gifts given me and with God's help,
you have allowed me to offer what I could as an agent of grace among you,
building you up to be worthy stewards of the talents entrusted to you.

I can't begin to say thank you to everyone individually or adequately
for your generosity, hospitality, warmth of affection and willingness to work.
Really, I can't. I'd be naming just about everyone here.
So let me simply say that Red Wing has left a mark on me...literally!
I don't know what the future will bring.
I have a sense of sadness about leaving here, leaving you,
about what we have done and left undone and what there is yet to accomplish.

But at the same time I know that it's going to be all right.
I do not sorrow as those who have no hope,
because I know that I'm leaving you in good hands,
Fr. Michael's hands and, more importantly, God's hands.

Someone said to me recently, "We won't let you down."
And I was perhaps too quick to bat that away.
I said, "Oh no, don't do it for me; do it for the church and for the glory of God."
I do mean those things, of course.
But you know, if I have played even a small part in your on-going work,
it will be a legacy I would treasure proudly.

Whatever comes, I trust that the Spirit of God will be with all of us wherever we go.
God will continue to be with you and with me,
guiding us and carrying us and bringing us into a new future,
even as we part to go our separate ways.
The same sustaining, creating God who has journeyed with us these past months
will continue to be with this church.
The same Word that has been proclaimed in this church for the past 153 years
will continue to be proclaimed and God will continue to use it to build you up.
And God's people will continue to flourish because the growth is God's alone
and is accomplished by God's Word working in us.
But all this doesn't happen without your help.

Let us be clear that your work is far from over,
Calling Michael to be your new settled rector is only one facet in a larger process.
As I have tried to get across on more than one occasion—
repetition repetition repetition—
you do not get to rest simply because he has arrived;
in fact you have just entered into a new phase of opportunity to get involved.
Just after the search process concluded, another someone said to me,
"There's so much riding on this guy."
(Breathe, Michael, breathe.)
Now I deeply respect the person who said this,
but you will understand that I couldn't disagree more.
Yes, Michael will be a leader in this community—
he is talented and more than capable
and you may expect him to contribute vision and direction—
but he is and always will be only one leader among many, one voice among many.
To be sure, he has certain areas of authority that are his alone,
according to our Anglican understanding of a priest's role,
but *you* are the Church, the hands and heart of Christ in the world.
You are the household of God that is the Episcopal Church in Red Wing,
a church family alive in Christ.

The on-going, transformative work of the church and its mission remains yours.
If you are not involved, or if your dreams are too timid or tepid, it will not happen
and your talents will lie hidden in the ground where they will do no one any good.

Let me be equally clear about something else—
I hope I have conveyed this all along, but just in case you missed it:
you are fully capable, collectively and individually.
You have the strength, the tools and the intelligence for this task
(and that includes the men as well as the women).
You can, with God's help, put mission before maintenance.
You can, with God's help, be an intentional rather than a casual community of faith.
You can, with God's help, be salt to the earth and light to the world.
You are uniquely gifted, creative, resourceful, and whole,
made in the image and likeness of God who loves you unconditionally.
So you build on a firm foundation, but it will take all of you working together,
each offering to share your very best, even all that you have,
to create a structure that will last.

Now *there's* the message of hope with which I want to leave you.
We are all made in love, by love, for love,
and then we are called to be faithful disciples:
to tell others the story of what God has done for us from the beginning,
to proclaim the fulfillment of God's promise as we see it in Jesus,
to let the Spirit turn our lives upside down as we follow Christ, calling others to join us.
If you can attempt to do this while keeping in mind the things I have just said,
I believe that they will help you to live every minute as willing witnesses to Christ,
and that with God's power working in you
you will achieve infinitely more than you can ask or imagine.

Thank you for the privilege of this time among you.
Amen.